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ABSTRACT

A review of literature examining how children are affected by women's employment was conducted. The review focused on the changes during the past two decades in the general approach of the researchers, with a specific focus on researcher bias and use of theory. First, literature reviews from the past three decades were conducted. Second, the work and family and child care research areas were sampled and evaluated quantitatively on several different variables to determine, statistically, what differences have taken place across the decades. These variables included the use of explicit theory-based hypotheses, the issue of ethnic bias in research design, the use of subjects from a variety of socioeconomic status (SES) levels, and the focus on father-child interactions in the research. Results showed that researchers in these areas, overall, have not made significant gains in addressing the issue of bias or increasing the use of theory; in fact, during the 1980s, the largest increase was in the percentage of studies where SES was not specified, and over one-half of the studies during this period did not specify ethnic group. Results did, however, show an increased focus on father-child interactions within the work and family research, although less than one-third of the studies examined father-child interactions in the 1980s. Based on these findings, recommendations are made for improving further research on the effects of parental employment on children. (TE)

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Women's Employment and Children: Researcher Bias And Use of Theory During the Past Two Decades

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Abstract

A review of literature examining how children are affected by women's employment was conducted. The purpose of the review was to focus on the changes that have occurred during the past two decades in the general approach of the researchers, with a specific focus on researcher bias and the use of theory. First, literature reviews from the past three decades were described. Secondly, the work and family and child care research areas were sampled and evaluated quantitatively on several different variables to determine, statistically, what differences have taken place across the decades. Results showed that researchers in these areas, overall, have not made significant gains in addressing the issue of bias or increasing the use of theory. Recommendations are made for improving further research on parental employment's effects on children.

Women's Employment and Children: Researcher Bias And Use of Theory During the Past Two Decades

During the past few decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of women with children in the work force. According to the most recent Statistical Abstract of the United States, the percentage of employed women with children under the age of six increased from 18.6% of all women in 1960 to 57.1% in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). This enormous societal change has led to a mass of research aimed at determining how employed mothers' children are affected. Many literature reviews have focused on the results of the research, but the purpose of this review is to focus on the general approach of the researchers, with the goal of determining how the research has changed during the past two decades. Because it seems probable that researcher bias concerning the "appropriateness" of mothers working for pay may affect research design, a focus on the methods used and the assumptions made within this body of research seems particularly important. Additionally, it is of interest to evaluate whether significant changes in research methods and assumptions may have occurred as a function of time, given that the sociological influence associated with the growing numbers of female workers may affect the manner in which social scientists form research questions. Included in this review are studies from all areas of research related to the topic of parental employment and its effect on children.

Reviews in the 1960s were limited to research on maternal employment and its effect on children (Hoffman, 1963; Siegel & Haas,

1963; Stolz, 1960). In the 1970s, this topic continued to be addressed, along with the new topic of the effects of child day care (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978; Etaugh, 1974; Hoffman, 1974, 1979; Poznanski, Maxey & Marsden, 1970; Wallston, 1973). Reviewers during these decades concluded that many problems, including researcher bias and a lack of theory incorporation characterized the 1960 and 1970 investigations. The 1980s research broadened to include dual-career families, latchkey children, and the impact of mothers' employment on all aspects of family life, rather than just on the children. However, no general theoretical framework guided the 1980s research and two reviews suggested the use of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological framework.

The issue of bias in the research was addressed directly in two reviews in the 1980s. Piotrkowski & Repetti (1984) pointed out that the psychological theories within dual-earner family research idealized full-time mothering. Smith (1981) described a similar bias, stating that much of the research on maternal employment's effects on preschool children has been based on what Russo (1979) termed "the motherhood mandate," or the inherent belief in our society that every woman should "have at least two children and raise them 'well,'" by being "physically present to serve her infant's every need" (p. 196). A number of other authors pointed out the need to study the effects of fathers' employment on the family, as well as the interaction of mothers' and fathers' employment and how this interaction impacts on the family (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Heyns, 1982; Hoffman, 1984; Spitze, 1988). Smith (1981) saw the fact that the focus has been solely on mothers' employment as evidence of the motherhood mandate

influencing research.

This review will attempt to address the use of theory and researcher bias by objectively examining the research during the past two decades on parents' employment and its effects on children. An attempt will be made to answer the following questions: 1) Have more research studies been based on theory? 2) Do researchers address the issue of bias, or acknowledge their biases? 3) Have researchers studied a larger variety of ethnic groups and SES levels? 4) Has there been an increase in the number of studies looking at the effects of fathers' employment on children and/or the father-child relationship in families in which both parents are employed?

Method

The time periods of 1975-77, and 1985-87 were chosen and Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, the Social Science Index, and the NCFR database were searched. The final sample included only published, empirical studies within the United States examining the effects of parental employment on children. This sample of 48 studies included 23 from the 1970s and 25 from the 1980s (see Appendix).

A preliminary coding form was designed and completed for the 48 articles. These completed forms were then used to determine specific categories for each item. Once the final coding form was completed, all of the studies were coded. Approximately ten percent of the articles were coded by a separate person to determine the reliability of the coding categories. The overall percent agreement for the coding form was 81.6%.

Results

Studies from the work and family research area (N=29), and studies from the child care research area (N=19) were analyzed separately. Chi square and Fisher's Exact Test analyses were used to determine whether the frequency of studies for the various coding categories was significantly different across decades. A chi square analysis was used if the expected frequencies were all greater than four; otherwise, Fisher's Exact Test was used. (Snedecor & Cochran, 1980; Young & Veldman, 1981). Significant differences that result from the use of chi square analyses are stated specifically. All other "statistically significant" findings result from the application of Fisher's Exact Test, and are significant at the $p<.05$ level.

During the coding process, the decision of whether or not a study's hypotheses or assumptions were based on a particular theory was made liberally. Nevertheless, as can been seen in Table 1, results showed that for the work and family research only 46.1% of the studies in the 1970s, and 50.0% of the studies in the 1980s were based on theory. For the child care research, 60.0% of the studies in the 1970s and 22.2% in the 1980s were based on theory. Although the child care research showed a rather large decrease in the percentage of studies based on theory, application of Fisher's Exact Test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant.

Insert Table 1 about here

Of those studies that were based on theory, the majority in the child care research were based on attachment theory. The work and family

research area showed the trend of moving from predominantly role and sex role theories in the 1970s to predominantly attachment theory in the 1980s. The differences across decades for all theories in both areas of research were not statistically significant.

To examine the issue of bias, it was determined for each study whether or not the author(s) directly acknowledged bias, did not address the issue of bias, or indirectly addressed the issue of bias by stating their assumptions. Results showed that none of the authors in either decade addressed the issue of bias directly (see Table 2). Furthermore, for both research areas there was no significant change across decades in the percentage of studies in which the assumptions were stated.

For SES level, Table 3 shows that within the work and family research area the percentage of studies using all middle-class subjects showed a statistically significant increase from 0.0% in the 1970s to 50.0% in the 1980s. Regarding the ethnic group of subjects, there were no significant changes across decades in the use of various subject groups (see Table 4). The percentage of studies in which ethnic group of subjects was not specified included approximately half of the 1980s studies.

To examine whether researchers have increased their focus on fathers' employment and its impact on children, and on father-child interaction or attachment within families in which both parents are employed, the dependent variables used in the research were examined. Table 5 shows that there were statistically significant differences across decades for only two of the dependent variables, both within the

work and family literature. These included mother-child attachment or interaction quality (0.0% in thr 1970s, 50.0% in the 1980s), and father-child attachment or interaction quality (0.0% in the 1970s, and 31.3% in the 1980s).

Insert Tables 2, 3, 4 & 5 about here

Within the child care literature the variable of interest, father-child attachment or interaction quality, decreased nonsignificantly from 10.0% in the 1970s to 0.0% in the 1980s.

Discussion

The purpose of this review was to examine how the research on parental employment has changed during the past several decades. To do this, the empirical literature was sampled and compared quantitatively on several variables. The first question was whether there was an increase across the decades in the number of studies based on theory. Using very liberal criteria for "theory-based," the results showed that within the work and family research of both decades only about half of studies met the criteria. Within the child care research the percentage decreased across decades from over half to only one-fifth of the studies. And, as a whole, results of this review suggest that researchers of the 1980s tended to use either attachment theory, or no theory at all when developing their studies, and that the attachment measured was generally between mother and child.

Regarding the issue of bias, results strongly suggest that researchers are neither acknowledging their biases, nor addressing the issue of bias. None of the authors in either research area, in either

decade, addressed the issue of bias directly. And, no more than one-third of the authors stated the assumptions they used to formulate their hypotheses. Therefore, even though this research area is very likely to be influenced by the biases of the investigators, this issue is not being addressed.

When examining whether or not researchers have used subjects from a variety of SES levels and ethnic groups, the results are also discouraging. Regarding SES, the only significant increase across decades was in the use of white, middle-class subjects. For the child care literature, the largest increase was in the percentage of studies in which SES was not specified. Therefore, it is clear that researchers of the 1980s were not paying more attention to the issue of using heterogeneous populations of subjects in terms of SES. Regarding ethnic group of subjects, the results suggest a similar conclusion, given that over half of the studies examined in the 1980s did not specify ethnic group.

Finally, the question of whether researchers have increased their focus on fathers' employment and father-child interactions, rather than studying only mothers, was addressed. Results of this review suggest an increased focus on father-child interactions within the work and family research. However, in the 1980s less than one-third of the studies looked at father-child interactions, while half looked at mother-child interactions, suggesting that an increased focus on fathers is still needed. Within the child care literature, there was no evidence to suggest an increased focus on fathers. Thus, both research areas appear to accept the assumption that mothers are the

influential caregivers.

Recommendations for further research in this area follow from the conclusions just stated. It is recommended that scholars spend more theory building, and that researchers make more use of theories in developing studies and hypotheses. This would allow for research to be more cohesive, rather than having different researchers designing studies based only on their own hypotheses. It would also allow for research to be less influenced by bias by providing a more systematic evaluation of the issues. Several authors have suggested that Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological framework be used to examine the effects of employment on children at different systemic levels. However, within the sample of studies reviewed here, this framework has not been translated into specific studies. Using this framework would allow researchers from different scientific disciplines to design research using a common language, and possibly accelerate the accumulation of knowledge. This idea is similar to Kuhn's (1970) idea of a scientific "paradigm" which consists of the shared values, beliefs, assumptions and techniques that scientists use to formulate research. Within a shared "paradigm," Kuhn (1970) believes that it is necessary for multiple, competing theories to exist in order for scientific knowledge to accumulate. If only one theory is used to study a particular area, it is difficult for this theory to be falsified. This is illustrated within the child care literature, which relies on an almost exclusive use of attachment theory. Not only does this represent the "motherhood mandate" bias of the researchers, but it is also important to keep in mind that if other theories were developed to examine the effect of day care on children, and studies were done in

which competing hypotheses based on different theories were tested, attachment theory might be found to be less useful than another theory.

Another recommendation is for researchers to develop an increased awareness of some of their own biases. Specifically, it is important for them to keep in mind their beliefs about parenting and about employment, and how these beliefs may affect their designing of research studies. This area of research has always been and continues to be emotionally charged, and, because biases cannot be avoided, it is recommended that researchers be open about the assumptions they are using when forming hypotheses and designing studies, and when drawing conclusions from their research results. This allows others making use of the results to keep those assumptions in mind when interpreting the results for themselves.

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APPENDIX

Work and Family Studies

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Table 1

Percentage of Studies Based on Theory in the 1970s vs. 1980s

	Work/Family (N-29)		Child Care (N-19)	
	1970s	1980s	1970s	1980s
Studies based on theory	46.1	50.0	60.0	22.2
Theory developed by authors	16.7	25.0	0.0	0.0
Attachment theory	0.0	50.0	83.3	100.0
Role theory/Sex role theory	50.0	12.5	16.7	0.0
Other	33.3	12.5	0.0	0.0
Studies not based on theory	53.9	50.0	40.0	77.8
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2

Percentage of Studies in which Authors Acknowledged Bias

In the 1970s vs. 1980s

	Work/Family (N-29)		Child Care (N-19)	
	1970s	1980s	1970s	1980s
Bias acknowledged	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Issue of bias not addressed	84.6	68.8	80.0	88.9
Assumptions of study are stated	15.4	31.3	20.0	11.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3

Percentage of Studies Using Various SES Groups in the 1970s vs. 1980s

	Work/Family (N-29)		Child Care (N-19)	
SES Group	1970s	1980s	1970s	1980s
All middle-class	0.0	50.0*	40.0	11.1
Mostly middle-class	15.4	18.8	10.0	22.2
All or mostly low-income	15.4	12.5	20.0	22.2
Mixture of different groups	23.1	6.2	30.0	11.1
SES not specified	46.1	12.5	0.0	33.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* Application of Fisher's Exact Test is significant at the $p<.05$ level

Table 1

Percentage of Studies Using Various Ethnic Groups In the 1970s vs. 1980s

	Work/Family (N=29)		Child Care (N=19)	
Ethnic Group	1970s	1980s	1970s	1980s
All white	7.7	12.5	10.0	0.0
Mostly white	23.1	25.0	30.0	22.2
All black or mostly black	15.4	0.0	20.0	22.2
Mixture of different groups	7.7	12.5	20.0	0.0
Ethnic group not specified	46.1	50.0	20.0	55.6
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5

Percentage of Studies Examining Various Dependent Variables In the 1970s vs. 1980s

	Work/Family (N=29)		Child Care (N=19)	
Variable	1970s	1980s	1970s	1980s
Child's aspirations/expectations	38.5	12.5	0.0	0.0
Child's school achievement	7.7	6.3	0.0	0.0
Child's sex role attitudes	46.2	12.5	0.0	0.0
Mother-child attach./inter. qual.	0.0	50.0*	60.0	11.1
Father-child attach./inter. qual.	0.0	31.3*	10.0	0.0
Parents' attitudes	0.0	6.3	0.0	11.1
Child's social/interact. beh.	7.7	25.0	90.0	88.9
Child's cogn. dev./intelligence	7.7	6.3	30.0	11.1
Child's compliance	0.0	0.0	10.0	33.3
Child's satisfaction	7.7	12.5	0.0	0.0
Behav. of parent or caregiver	0.0	25.0	10.0	22.2
Other	61.6	37.5	40.0	33.3

* Application of Fisher's Exact Test is significant at the $p<.05$ level